

Climbing Out - Exploring the Psychosocial Impacts of an Adventure Programme for Young Adult Survivors of Cancer

Research Findings 2016:

In 2015 Matthew Slavin wrote the thesis for his Msc in Physiological studies on the Psychosocial Impact of an Adventure programme on young adult survivors of cancer. He based his research on the Climbing Out programmes.

Matthew spoke with 15 individuals who had participated in a Climbing Out programme over the last one-three years. 7 participants were recruited for the study, who then completed a pilot interview followed by a semi structured interview. All the participants were aged between 18 and 24 years and were in either complete or partial remission.

Below is a summary of the study that was undertaken.

A full copy of M. Slavins thesis can be found at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/9ljin5rpc9ecntij/Slavin%20-%20Climbing%20Out-%20Exploring%20the%20Psychosocial%20Impacts%20of%20an%20Adventure%20Programme%20for%20Young%20Adult%20Survivors%20of%20Cancer.pdf?dl=0>

The Background

With an increase in the survival rate of those diagnosed with cancer, many young people now live with cancer as opposed to dying from it.

Climbing Out works with participants in young adulthood, a transitional period where individuals may become more susceptible to the adverse psychological impacts of cancer, including changes to their physical appearance and changes in their peer relationships through loss, rejection, or time away from their social networks.

This can create notable psychosocial challenges for young adult cancer survivors to meet developmental milestones, such as establishing independence, starting careers and forming romantic relationships.

This can result in psychosocial difficulties such as self-esteem and identity development.

As a result, one of the major challenges in the care of young adult survivors of cancer is to enhance their psychological state.

With growing survival rates for cancer, it is of increasing importance that appropriate rehabilitation programmes are utilised to address the needs of survivors at this important developmental stage.

It has been identified that more than 50% of young adult survivors of cancer indicate that their needs for support services is currently being unmet.

The Impact of Physical Activity on Survivors of Cancer:

Physical activity programmes are becoming increasingly recognised as effective intervention, providing psychological benefits including improvements in mood, ability, autonomy, peer interactions and quality of life

What we are trying to achieve through Adventure Therapy:

Adventure therapy can target many of the issues that young adult survivors of cancer face, such as learned helplessness, feelings of low self-esteem and lack of autonomy.

Physical challenges associated with adventure activities that emphasise personal achievement and responsibility, can create an environment for personal growth, trust and perceived risk taking. The adventure programmes then attempt to transfer accomplishments and feelings of self-worth to wider psychosocial challenges in everyday life, finding parallels between adventure and real life. In addition to this, the organisational structure of the programmes are non-hierarchical, with conscious efforts to foster trust and openness.

Contact with the outdoor environment and physical activity can positively influence both mental and physical health.

It has been recognised, that quality of life for young adult cancer survivors is dependant not only on their medical treatment, but also on the successful management of psychosocial difficulties related to their treatment.

The Study:

There is currently only limited research into the impact of adventure programmes on young survivors of cancer, with much of this research being concentrated in America and on the short term outcomes. This study therefore, looks to explore the long term impact of an adventure programme, looking at participants narratives several years after involvement.

Limitations to the study:

We acknowledge that the number of participants interviewed was limited, and further research will provide further evidence to support the findings in this study. The interpretations within the study are based on a small participant sample from a unique population. As a result, these findings do not aim to be representative of all young survivors' experiences of cancer. There will also always remain a slight linguistical gap between the participants accounts and the researcher's interpretation.

The Programme:

The programmes last from Monday to Friday and are based in the Lake District using Youth Hostels for accommodation.

The activities are carefully adapted to the capabilities of the group and run with a high support staff ratio from outdoor professionals, healthcare support workers and programmes ambassadors.

The week is run with a maximum of 16 participants aged 18-30 yrs old, with a strong emphasis on capability and the opportunity to achieve personal growth.

The week of adventure activities is interspersed with reflective discussions and talks on psychological matters aimed at aiding personal growth.

Social events are also organised in the evenings.

Beyond the 5 day programmes, participants are invited to join annual Climbing Out weekends, as well as gaining membership of the Climbing Out club, offering continued support, development, friendships and social events.

The Psychosocial Impact of Cancer

Alongside the physical side effects associated with cancer and its treatment, participants detail other psychological side effects, highlighting experiences of low mood, suicidal thoughts, social anxiety and grief. Participants highlight a loss of confidence and self-esteem both during and post treatment. Additionally participants describe feelings of social isolation, discrimination and loss of independence.

Changes to self concept:

Participants describe feelings of becoming defined by their illness and becoming known as “the cancer kid”.

Following diagnosis, participants described significant changes to their personality, feeling that fundamental elements of “the self” were missing

Following involvement with Climbing Out, they described a return to feeling normal and a shift in self-concept to that of an individual no longer identified as someone characterised by illness.

Each participant described a change in self-concept following programme participation, no longer seeing themselves as unwell or defined by their illness.

Adventure activities appear to promote a positive self-concept, rebuilding self-esteem and personal feelings of worthiness.

Participants strongly suggest that involvement in Climbing Out enables them to reclaim their identity beyond disease.

The unique social environment of Climbing Out normalises the cancer experience, allowing individuals that they are not alone in their struggle.

Fostering Hope:

Another theme that became apparent from the participants experiences was one of fostering hope.

Participants spoke about significant interactions and experiences within the programme which led to a change in their attitude to one more focused on optimism and hope.

Hope is seen as an essential characteristic of human life and integral to an individual’s quality of life. Hope plays a significant role in coping with adjustment and is an essential inner resource.

Participant experiences strongly suggest that adventure therapy programmes may prove effective in the cultivation of hope in young adult cancer survivors.

Participants demonstrate a shift from hopelessness to a “willingness and desire to overcome their current problems”

As Francesca states “I don’t know where I’d be if I hadn’t gone on that trip..... I think Climbing Out saved my life....I don’t know if I’d be brave enough to take my own life like I was questioning at the time whether life was worth living.....so if you want to know what impact Climbing Out makes, it potentially is lifesaving.....”

It appeared that the social dynamics of the programme fostered an attitude hope through interactions with others facing life threatening illness and ongoing difficulties.

Climbing Out provides a therapeutic environment in which a renewed sense of hope and optimism is instilled from others.

The programme harnessed positivity and influenced an attitude change to one of creating good from adverse and traumatic experiences.

Once participants had completed the programme they had gained a more positive view of what was ahead for them in the future and realised they were capable of much more than what they first believed when starting the programme.

Climbing Out appears to create a sense of community and support amongst group members, which in itself reduces feelings of isolation and hopelessness, and provides an environment in which hope can be cultivated

Cultivating Capability:

Strongly embedded in the participants experience was a shift in focus towards capability, or self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity to exert influence over events that affect their life

Participants who had previously had a fixation with health concerns and physical limitations reported that involvement with Climbing Out shifted their focus towards personal strengths and capabilities. Pushing limits beyond their perceived limitations appeared powerful in regard to long term changes in individual's beliefs.

As Jack states:

"If I've done that throughout the week....what else can I do in my personal life....."

Pushing participants beyond their perceived limitations created a feeling of achievement and mastery associated with completing the activities, embedding a change in attitude that appeared to have significance long after the completion of the programme.

The programmes create an environment that is focused on capability and achievement and the careful adaption of activities by programme leaders facilitates experiences of mastery in the outdoors, and the renewed confidence due to successes within the confounds of the week can be translated into wider life.

The unique group cohesiveness of Climbing Out also creates a renewed sense of capability through observing others achieve within the programme.

Observing peers succeed through sustained efforts raises individual's beliefs that they too hold the capacity to master comparable challenges, resulting in individuals reporting achievements beyond what they thought was possible when acting alone.

The programmes are intent on developing strengths and capability through the application of manageable tasks, it would appear Climbing Out reinforces positive aspects of coping, highlighting achievement, capability and strength, shifting attention from failure, weakness and disability

Awareness and Acceptance:

Involvement in the Climbing Out programme appeared to lead to a turning point, providing participants with an increased awareness of the difficulties they had and were currently facing, providing a platform from which they could activate change through reflection and acceptance.

As Daniel says

".....it not only helped me overcome what was going on in my head, it actually helped me realise it was there as well".

Through a greater awareness and recognition of their mental state, participants reported a process of overcoming self-limiting beliefs and coming to terms with their experiences of cancer and it's consequent psychosocial impact.

Again Daniel comments

"....it's easy to think you're ok when you're not really.....I was trying to move on and leave it all behind. But you can't do that, not so soon after. You can't just sweep it under the carpet. Climbing Out helped me deal with it and make it into a positive thing"

The programme appears to be transformational in renewing a sense of hope, allowing individuals to feel normal again and shifting limiting beliefs. Involvement in Climbing Out appears to involve an acceptance of the profound changes that are experienced in receiving a diagnosis of cancer in childhood and adolescence.

The Supportive Group:

Participants frequently commented on the significance of the group and the unique social environment of Climbing Out.

Beyond the activities, participants talked about the importance of being in a safe and supportive environment that was founded upon trust. They then felt they could push themselves physically for the first time since treatment.

Participants also highlight the empowering and transformational quality of working with others, and how changes in attitude occurred through observing and working within a supportive group.

Shared Experience:

All the participants interviewed commented on the significance of having a shared history and a set of shared experiences.

In that respect, Climbing Out appears to create a unique environment, something that appears to foster trust, positive affect and emotional support.

Jack comments

".....it's just a group of young people you know you can trust and you know you can be yourself because you've been through similar situations...."

Understanding each other:

Participants recognised that there existed a strong understanding of each other.

In having a serious illness, there appeared to be a common theme of feeling socially isolated. Participants on the programme appreciated the non-judgemental nature of their peers on the programme.

There appeared to be a level of acceptance that is not evident from peers that haven't experienced chronic health conditions.

Participants describe a unique feeling of acceptance, safety and trust with others their own age who understood what each other had been through.

Interactions with peers who had been through similar experiences provided what appeared to be a safe place for reflection, the opportunity to push themselves in an environment of encouragement, to feel part of something greater than themselves, and to make connections with others that may grow in friendship

Post Traumatic Growth in Health Related Trauma

Adventure programmes such as Climbing Out appear to help create resilience and aid adaption when faced with significant adversity.

The research provides evidence to suggest that adventure programmes can be an effective intervention strategy to transform traumatic life experiences such as cancer into opportunities for growth.

PARTICIPANTS STATE A GREATER SENSE OF PERSONAL STRENGTH, MORE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS, RENEWED CONFIDENCE AND A GREATER APPRECIATION OF LIFE THAT SURPASSES PRE-TRAUMA LEVELS

It would appear that involvement in Climbing Out helps not only to foster adjustment and recovery following a major chronic illness but actually precipitates post traumatic growth.